

## TIME HASN'T EASED THE PAIN, FAMILY SAYS MELODY RUCKER 'S MOTHER AIDS OTHER SURVIVORS

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When **Melody Rucker**, a junior at Benedictine High School, was shot to death in front of a friend's west side home in August 1986, the news spread fast.

The case blazed across newspaper front pages and on radio and television programs. It blazed until all three 17-year-olds responsible were sent to prison.

Then the public spotlight turned elsewhere.

And those who loved **Melody Rucker** -- nicknamed "Poochie" -- were left to their mourning.

Her mother, Vera, is a deeply religious woman who grew up in the Episcopal Church. She is absolutely convinced that God loves her.

So she's baffled at the intensity of her sorrow almost six years after her daughter's death.

"It's hard to know why God hasn't lifted this, that I continue to grieve," she said.

"I have not been back to the cemetery since we buried Poochie. My husband and my daughter go all the time. But **Melody** and I were so close. . ." Her voice trailed off. It isn't that **Rucker** has been sitting around waiting for God to make things right.

She has her husband, two sons, the daughter and a grandson to care for.

She's active in St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, particularly its Sunday school.

And she's a leader in Save Our Sons and Daughters, which helps families of children slain in Detroit and runs programs to try to stop the killing.

Sharing tears, comfort

She's in daily contact with survivors like herself. She cries with them. She comforts them. And she stands as witness to them that life goes on after a child dies.

Many mothers, even years after their children are slain, find they cannot talk publicly about their loss. **Rucker** speaks for them.

And she focuses on the children who haven't been killed, those for whom she wants to ensure a tomorrow.

"I did an article for the Sunday school newsletter, and I said we've built new classrooms and we've got it all looking neat," she said, "and now we need children. . . .

"You look in the kids' eyes, and all you see is a hollow place. . . . They've dealt with so much. They won't put their trust in anybody. They say, 'I'll do what I have to do to survive.' . . . They think, 'If I don't reach out to anybody, I won't have to feel anything when that person is killed.' . . .

"This is such a big problem it won't heal overnight. If you can make just one person smile, if you can be there for one person, one family. You have to do the same things over and over.

"It's the circle, the ring. The minute there's a crack in that circle, you have to patch it right away. As people, we're all in that circle. . . . You can't give up. You have to keep trying everything."

Each handles grief differently

So **Rucker** fills her life with love and service. She smiles. She laughs. But inside, the hard knot of grief for **Melody** never untangles.

At home, she and her family draw strength from one another. Yet in a way, each must handle the grief alone:

\* **Melody** 's father, John. "It was hard on him, and it's still hard on him," his wife said. "We talk about it. . . . He's an international rep for the UAW, and his work keeps him on the go all the time. **Melody** had tried to get him to stop smoking -- and he's almost stopped. Well . . . "

Vera **Rucker** paused, then added, almost in a whisper, "She was his Poochie."

\* **Melody** 's sister, Penelope **Rucker** Vaughn, 24, married and an Army private when her sister died. "She and her husband came when **Melody** was killed, but by her having to go back after 10 days, she had a hard time," her mother said. "She wouldn't talk about it. . . .

"A year after **Melody** died, Pen was pregnant with Jay . . . so she had that to look forward to. . . . She'll never be completely healed, but Jay has kept her going."

\* **Melody** 's older brother, John Jr., who was 18 when his sister died. "John went away to school that September, to DeVry, in Decatur, Ga., and he stayed on campus," his mother said. "Then he went to Morehouse, and he lived with my mother. . . . She said he'd see something about violence on TV, and he'd go in the bedroom and just sit there staring at Poochie's picture. . . .

"He's being more open about it now. He came home in June. He's going to school for accounting -- Oakland Community College. This has been good for him to be home, because at one point he said he'd never live in this city again."

\* **Melody** 's younger brother, Samuel Anthony, who was 12 when his sister died. "Poochie was so outgoing, and Tony's like Poochie," his mother said. " **Melody** had just turned 16, and they had all these great plans. **Melody** would be driving him to school that year.

"It affected his grades. They dropped off. And he wouldn't go near **Melody** 's room. . . .

"I guess I got overprotective of him. I didn't want him to go anywhere. I realized I was smothering him, and he was dying in two ways -- because of **Melody** and because of me. . . .

"He went to Our Lady of Victory, on Meyers, but there was so much of **Melody** there that I pulled him out. But that was a mistake, because I pulled him away from his friends and his support. He went to St. Scholastica, and then he went to U of D. But he asked if he could go to Benedictine in the ninth grade, and when he got there, there was much more laughter in his voice. Benedictine, I think, was good therapy for him. John had graduated there. It was family tradition. . . .

"Tony just turned 17. Now that he's driving, I do find myself at times being overprotective again -- because I know what can happen."

Solace in religion

As she has all her life, Vera **Rucker** has turned to her church for help. "My church family was right there for me," she said. "They knew Poochie from my pregnancy to birth to death."

And working with SOSAD founder Clementine Barfield has helped, too. There was the day **Rucker** got caught in a traffic jam caused by a funeral procession. She panicked, but managed to get home and call Barfield.

"Just to have someone to talk to, somebody to come and sit with you," **Rucker** said. "Sometimes we don't even say anything."

Another time, the two drove to Lansing together.

"We hadn't been together for a long time," **Rucker** said, "so we were laughing and laughing, and it was so good to laugh."

Thus does Vera **Rucker** keep the faith. Vaughn is divorced and out of the Army now, and she and 4-year-old Jay live with the older Ruckers, so the grandparents see their family line stretching out before them.

But the serenity that should flow from that is missing. The natural assumption that **Rucker** 's children and her children's children will outlive her is gone forever.

"I take my grandson on my lap," she said, "and I say, 'Thank you, Lord, for giving us Jay, no matter how long we have him.' "

Caption: Photo JOHN A. STANO

: Vera **Rucker** holds her grandson, Jay, 4. Jay's aunt **Melody , Rucker** 's youngest daughter, was killed in a drive-by shooting in 1986 when she was a high school junior at Benedictine High School in Detroit.

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